



PROVENCE

“IF ART REFLECTS LIFE, IT DOES SO WITH SPECIAL MIRRORS”

— BERTOLT BRECHT



Developed and founded as a result of the pandemic, Specchi Magici is an artist-run platform based in Berlin and Milan, known for producing and selling mirror-like objects that are neither design nor art. Their first mirror was released this past August and created by founder Riccardo Paratore.

Having initially met in 2013 under the tutelage of Peter Fischli at the Städelschule art academy, Frankfurt and Seoul-based artist-translator Dan Kwon interviews artist and founder Riccardo Paratore, shedding light on the genesis and future of Specchi Magici.

Dan Kwon: [Looking at the photos] When and how did you and Milovan meet?

Riccardo Paratore: It was when I showed my mirrors for the first time, in 2014, through Hans Ulrich Obrist, who put us in touch via “URGENT YOU HAVE TO MEET” emails. Milovan was the curator at the Fiorucci Art Trust. Later, when he and Nicoletta Fiorucci visited my exhibition at Galeria Federico Vavassori, they decided to buy the works for the trust, as well as stage another show with the same works in Nicoletta’s guest apartment in Monte Carlo, for which you wrote a text.

DK: At Galeria Vavassori, which was at ground level at the time, you built walls around the storefront windows to make window displays like the ones we see from outside luxury stores. In other words, you constructed an exhibition space within the exhibition space, but only around the windows. If my memory serves, it housed your works consisting of fake Mies van der Rohe furniture shipped from China, and defaced by your own hand. The installation also contained some of the first iterations of your mirrors.

RP: Correct.

DK: Makes me think of that poem about mussels by Marcel Broodthaers: “This clever thing has avoided society’s mould. She’s cast herself in her very own. Other look alikes share with her the anti-sea. She’s perfect.”

RP: I’ve always been fascinated by product displays, which is probably related to being a son of a car dealer. My childhood was split into two parts by two different businesses, both in northern Germany and close to Hamburg. The first six years of my life, my father owned an Italian restaurant and we lived right upstairs from it. Later, we lived in a narrow building that was also split in two: one half domestic and the other half a car dealership, with big windows facing the street. He used to place his fanciest cars on display.

DK: An Italian restaurant in rural Germany. How fancy were the cars?

RP: No, not rural, but suburban. Most of my father’s income came from selling big quantities of used cars to booming economies in the Middle East, Central Africa, and Eastern

Europe. Once in a while, he would get a request to deliver something like a Porsche 911 or a Ferrari Testarossa, which he would then show off to the street...

But enough about him. I want to talk about the creative impact my mother had on me. She had a post-Communist Romanian background and was a housewife. To be honest, she was frustrated and used the nouveau wealth for excessive consumption. Maybe as a way to express her suppressed creativity. She always dressed ostentatiously, in 90s avant-garde fashion. Her wardrobe took a lot of space and consisted almost exclusively of Prada, Gucci, Helmut Lang, and Jil Sander. She had over a hundred pairs of shoes back then.

DK: Sounds like she influenced you in that sort of way, through having you experience the joy of shopping and exploring the ways clothes can make you feel.

RP: She always brought me and my sister on her shopping sprees. (I enjoyed it much more than my sister by the way.) She liked to dress us, and I myself became interested in fashion to a degree that was very alienating to my classmates in suburban Germany. Our consumption made us aliens there.

DK: I know that feeling around certain Germans. I remember when we first met, you had just moved from Düsseldorf, and were rather surprised by how fancy the Frankfurt art students seemed. How did you get into art anyway?

RP: My parents’ divorce. Which burned all the wealth they had accumulated, affected me in the worst way imaginable, and college became out of the question. At the same time, I found joy in art classes. But since I didn’t have the means to attend art school back then, I became a cleaner at a hobby art school near France. I found my first mentors there: some members of the 1968 student movements and former students of Beuys that had a very social perspective on art and its accessibility. The directors there noted my interest. They eventually allowed me to attend classes and use the studios after my shifts. I improved my grades through the evening classes and eventually prepared my application for Kunstakademie Düsseldorf.

Photographs: Francesco Nazardo
Styling: Francesca Cefis Casoli
Set design: Alessandro Mensi
Make up: Manuel Ian Farro
Models: Milovan Farronato and Riccardo Paratore

Specchi Magici

DK: Let’s fast forward. The pandemic freed so much time for some. How was 2020 in hindsight?

RP: Yeah. So by the time I graduated Städelschule and left Frankfurt, I had already become some sort of a metropolitan nomad and was hungry for the big city life. I ended up living in fashion capitals like Milan, Paris and New York City. It was work related and otherwise. I was in Milan when the virus first hit Europe. Then I got stuck there, and for two months I was pretty much locked up in a 20 sqm Airbnb, while most of my rich Milanese friends caught up on their reading in their family summer homes by the seaside. What was truly a lockdown for me seemed like a retreat for them. The pandemic made class disparity even more striking, of course. There came a point where I could no longer afford psychoanalysis, which I desperately needed; you know, since I had to pay out of my own pocket for therapy, like in most places of the world. That’s when I decided to move back to Germany, to benefit from the German health care system, just so I could continue with treatment.

DK: What’s up with the photoshoot? Seems it’s in reference to something specific.

RP: My time in Milan often makes me think of Pasolini’s 1968 film, *Teorema*. Our stylist Francesca Cefis Casoli came up with the idea to do a *Teorema*-inspired psychoanalytic mise-en-scène. In the film, the protagonist of the movie is a total outsider, played by Terence Stamp, infiltrates a family and disrupts the Milanese-bourgeois order and, of course, I often identified with the character. The subversive disappears at some point, leaving the family in complete disorder.

DK: Maybe this is a good place to turn full circle. Speaking of roles—class background, disparities and such—maybe your mirrors harken back to the figure of a child shopping with his post-Soviet mother, trying on different clothes and luxury items as a way to experiment with identity, and so on. In a way, the Mirror/Vase, the first piece from your venture Specchi Magici, speaks so much to that. You can change the flowers

and their arrangements all you want, to keep reflection fluid, if you like, but the base remains essentially the same.

RP: I think, through psychoanalysis, I’ve come to terms with the fact that I enjoy having an entrepreneurial mindset. I’ve always identified with Andy Warhol, who was very much a child of the diasporic working-class. Specchi Magici is mainly inspired by artists that had a side hustle. Like the pop artist that made window displays at Macy’s. In Italy, some started furniture companies like Poltronova, which was later managed by Ettore Sottsass.

DK: Not sure if it was Macy’s, but Warhol used to be a window dresser at some New York City department store where he once hung his early paintings around dressed mannequins and chrome poles.

RP: That was at Bonwit Teller. During my time in Paris, I spent a lot of time in the libraries and was reminded how the birthplace of the readymade was the shop window, when Duchamp encountered a urinal displayed in a Parisian home appliance store.

DK: More on the furniture company Poltronova and its figures?

RP: Poltronova was funded by an artist named Sergio Camilli. He later hired the emerging designer Ettore Sottsass as de facto director, who would become one of Italy’s most prominent figures of the so-called radical design movement in the late 60s. This relationship between the artist and the designer at Poltronova was really one a kind. It was an attempt to operate without hierarchy, facilitating experimentation and production of radical design objects. I’ve read somewhere that the workers at the manufacturing factory used to call each other ‘comrade.’

DK: Could you please share more on how the mirrors are made? Are they made somewhere in Milan?

RP: I have a special relationship with Giovanardi Spa, which is a manufacturer for fashion store interiors and window displays on the outskirts of Milan. We share a mutual fascination for each other’s skills. We like to bring various ideas and discuss the ways to materialize them with their knowledge in manufacturing. There is virtually not a thing they can’t make. Their passion and patience for unusual objects is something you’d rarely find in Germany, where you always first get asked, “What is this good for?” The rather small number of objects we commission with them isn’t very profitable, and they normally work with high-profile groups like LVMH or Kering. So working with them is based rather on friendship and mutual respect. It’s such a privilege!

DK: What’s your main goal?

RP: My main goal now is to have stability, both mental and financial. And, of course, to collaborate on joyous as well as sellable objects with people I like, and for everyone involved to at least not worry about paying rent. Basically to be able to function as an artist without relying on art sales, which I find unreliable. I’m also not very fond of taking part in the grant lottery and I hate writing applications.

This so-called mirror company began as a sort of vanity project. For peace of mind. One should preen oneself not to become a complete asshole.

DK: What’s next for Specchi Magici?

RP: We have a small launch in Milan at Oxilia Gallery, a new gallery for experimental design. For the set design, we consulted the Milan-based architect and friend Alessandro Bava. We invited Matteo Pit, a DJ and musician, to compose the soundscape. Simultaneously, we also have the mirrors on display at Carla Sozzani’s 10 Corso Como in their book and design section. The support we have in Milan so far is amazing. I’m so grateful for that.

Obviously none of this would have been possible without the very skilled friends: architects, business consultants, engineers, set designers, photographers, graphic designers,

writers, manufacturers, distributors, stylists, and editors. I hope I didn’t forget anyone! Someone I’ve been working with from the very beginning is Celeste Burlina, a structural engineer and artist who used to design bridges. She will be designing our next mirror by the way. I heard it will be a beauty mirror, but that’s all I can say for now, sorry! I think we want to produce one or two mirrors per year, as well as a few publications, and collaborate with artists on performance based events.

